

Pick a Place, But Not Any Place

The environment in which trainers train is of extreme importance. Yet, it rarely is considered when meeting facilities are planned.

By COLEMAN FINKEL

Somewhere between learning about program design and delivery, many trainers missed a vital lesson: How to plan a training facility. Consequently, these professionals, when faced with planning an on-site or off-site facility, often make faulty decisions—decisions based on incorrect assumptions about the training environment's effect on learning.

One incorrect assumption: The facility has no effect on learning. This belief is becoming less prevalent as trainers increasingly recognize the powerful influence that environment has over learning.

Another incorrect assumption: A beautiful facility guarantees big training results. This belief no doubt stems from studies that show, for instance, the positive effects of pastel colors on learning. While room color, or room beauty in general, may indeed be influential, it should not be considered alone. *No* factor should be considered alone.

What are the main considerations in facility planning? What is required for the best possible learning environment?

For purposes of discussion, consider a training program that takes three to five full days, involves 30 participants, and will take place at an off-site facility. The more the participants are together as one group, the more they will discuss meeting-related topics and, subsequently, the more they will learn. This constructive interaction

will occur not only during the formal portion of the program, but during the informal parts. The facility, therefore, should be able to accommodate all participants together, not just for training, but also for breaks, meals, and social activities.

It's important to note that, if possible, all meeting time should be spent in one facility. Though there may be side trips to company plants or offices, once participants have made the mental transition to the facility, moving them interrupts their learning. Directing participants from the meeting room to another facility for meals, and to a third for sleeping, lessens the control leaders have over participants' activities and reduces learning possibilities.

For as many activities as possible, the participants should be assigned private areas, exclusive to their training group. They should have their own dining room, for example, and within that dining area, tables designated for members of each subgroup. If they share rooms with groups from other firms, the participants will become distracted by the crowd noise and the presence of strangers.

Aside from physical accommodations, psychological factors of a facility must be considered. Can program attendees make the necessary psychological transition from the moment they enter the meeting place to the end of their stay? They must be able to free themselves from the pressures, anxieties, and problems of the competitive outside world. The properly designed environment helps attendees feel relaxed. This mind-set encourages thinking, probing, and learning.

The proper environment also raises the participants' concentration levels. It does

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so by helping participants adjust to more passive actions—sitting, listening, absorbing, taking notes—than are probably part of their regular work. Adjusting to a passive role is difficult for the typical attendee whose job requires being the “doer.” That person has been away from the disciplines necessary for classroom concentration. Facilities without such negative influences as noise, uncomfortable chairs, glare from

reflective surfaces, poor lighting, sight obstructions, and inadequate air circulation promote maximum tranquility and concentration.

Multiple meeting environments

Following are several environments characteristic of meeting facilities. The im-

portance of these environments to a particular meeting depends on the nature of the most time-consuming meeting activities.

- The principal training room
- The break-out rooms for small-group project work
- The participants' private rooms, which serve as temporary homes, meeting with other participants, relaxing, reading, and other personal activities
- The indoor and outdoor recreation and exercise areas
- The areas where participants take breaks, attend receptions, and socialize
- The dining rooms
- The facility's exterior and grounds.

With these environments determined, a trainer can begin to analyze the appropriateness of a facility. The first step is to list all meeting activities. The list may include presentations and discussions; work in small-group projects; individual work related to the program; meals; breaks; group cocktail receptions; informal socializing among participants; recreation and exercise; personal activities; and sleeping.

Once the list is complete, the trainer estimates the amount of time spent each day on each activity. Next, the trainer determines, based on the time estimations, which of the many facility environments most of the meeting activity will take place in. The greater the number of hours spent in an activity, the more important that activity is to the facility planning. By the end of this procedure, the main environment to consider in planning the facility should be evident to the trainer.

Accent on detail

Facility perfection is established through meticulous attention to detail. Each of the many details involved in each facility environment must be examined closely—no detail is unimportant. Determine how each one affects learning. Details that contribute to learning are kept or added; ones that hinder participant learning or leader effectiveness are changed or eliminated.

Following is a list of details of the principal meeting room environment, with considerations that must be weighed.

- *Noise*—Listen for either intermittent or continuous noise from the heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems; from adjacent rooms or corridors; or from outside the building.
- *Colors*—Variations of white are cold and sterile; shades of black and brown are fatiguing. Look for pastel shades of orange,



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green, blue, or yellow—happy, fresh, pleasant colors to view.

■ **Room structure**—Look out for long, narrow rooms, which space participants apart. This makes it harder for individuals in the back to see and hear and to feel a sense of identification with the discussion. Try to use rooms that are square.

■ **Lighting**—The main source of lighting should be fluorescent. Incandescent lighting should be spread through the room, and when projection is required, used with dimmers. Sconces and chandeliers are poor sources of light and are distracting.

■ **Wall and floor covering**—The meeting room should be carpeted completely. Neither carpeting nor wallpaper should be floral, striped, or in vivid colors, or they will distract. Solid shades—neither too light nor too dark—are preferable.

■ **Meeting room chairs**—Do not use stack chairs or chairs with rigid backs. Chairs should have wheels, swivels, and backs that provide support in the lower back.

■ **Pictures, clocks, sculptures**—Only meeting-related material should be on the

walls of the meeting room. No wall objects should attract the eyes of participants, taking their minds off the program.

■ **Glare**—Check on and eliminate glare sources, such as metal surfaces, TV monitors, and mirrors. The glare of reflected light induces eye fatigue.

■ **Ceiling**—At least 9-foot, and preferably 10-foot ceilings are necessary.

■ **Windows**—The principal meeting room should have no windows. They are very distracting, participants stare out of windows frequently. Windows take up space that can be better used for hanging meeting-related materials. Outside light coming into the room changes throughout the day, affecting the shadowing in the room and altering participants' ability to see. If the day is rainy or overcast, viewing the weather is a depressant. A final disruptive feature of windows: They allow noise to penetrate from the outside.

■ **Electrical outlets**—Outlets should be spread every six feet around the walls. Preferably, a telephone jack should be placed next to the outlets. This arrangement allows for computer hook-ups. One

outlet should be in the floor, eight feet from the instructional wall, for the overhead projector.

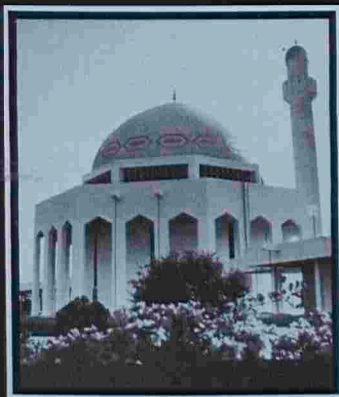
■ **Acoustics**—Check on the bounce or absorption of sound from the walls, ceiling, floors, and furniture. Do voice checks with three or four people, monitoring voice clarity and level.

B.F. Skinner, in his book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, says, "We are all simply a product of the stimuli we get from the outside world. Specify the environment completely enough and you can exactly predict individual actions."

We may not be able to predict the *exact* reactions of meeting participants through careful planning of the meeting environment. However, we can predict that thoughtful, careful facility planning will increase participant learning and leadership satisfaction. It also will promote the feeling by all involved that their time was spent productively.



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